**no good men in hyperion**

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**Characters:**
Juno Steel, Peter Nureyev, Rita (Penumbra Podcast), Jet Sikuliaq, Buddy Aurinko, Vespa (Penumbra Podcast), Nova Zolotovna (Penumbra Podcast), M'tendere (Penumbra Podcast), Sasha Wire, Mick Mercury, Alessandra Strong, (she doesn't make much of an appearance in this one but she will return)

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Inspired by Six of Crows, started out as an au but then i wanted them in fancy clothes, Heist, thievery of an Actual Human Person, jailbreak, sincerely hope this has some kind of oceans 8 vibes, but gay and in space, also. six of crows vibes., because we do have grisha, but y'all can read without knowing that stuff, Canon-Typical Violence, Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers, k. kind of????, Drug Use, ...also kind of., is it drugs if it's. like., a pill that makes your superpowers cool but wears off in time but is also Kinda Addictive, the lysonia capsule is also kind of magic, Trans Peter Nureyev, HoH Peter Nureyev, (why? it just ended up happening and also jay onetiredboy's fic enabled me), The Penumbra Minibang

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# no good men in hyperion

by nottodaylogic (mandaloreartist)

Summary

*Juno grabbed the thief's arm and dragged him out of the room. He only raised an eyebrow in response. "Why, detective, how forward of you."*

*"Cut it, Ransom, or whatever your name is." Juno shoved a closet open and pulled him inside. "Why do you keep following me?"*

*His eyes widened, but something about it seemed rehearsed, fake. Juno didn't feel remorseful in the damn slightest. "I haven't the slightest idea what you mean."*

*"Engstrom. Kanagawa. Even goddamn Morales." His voice slipped into a growl. "You've been on my trail for weeks now, and I want to know* why."

(Written for the 2019-2020 Penumbra Mini Bang)

Notes

hello!! so this was a passion project of mine that ended up Enormous?? i've been working on it since november, it's so self indulgent i could just die, and i love it with all my heart. regretfully, it's not done because i've been having inner ear problems for the last month and a half, making it more difficult to write, but it Will be completed in a timely manner.

inspired heavily by six of crows, and borrows a bit of the grishaverse lore, but you don't have to have read it and i'll have notes with the relevant words :)

features art by the spectacular seratlantisite and the incredible legend-ofzegend, betaed by the amazing lurking-umbra, thank you all so so so much for being just the most wonderful people, you can find them all on tumblr

also, everyone in this has been aged down a significant amount. juno and peter are like twenties, so everyone else has been

adjusted accordingly. this is because it's an au, so events like benten's death have happened more recently for them. i promise it makes sense

See the end of the work for more notes

# peter

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

More than anything, people came to Hyperion City for the thrill of it.

It was known from all around as a den of glamour and riches, where

you could gamble your life away if you weren't careful. The drugs were legendary in both effectiveness and the tolls they took after the high wore off. Some saved up money to go there, even more were content to dream about it.

Those who lived in Hyperion, however, called it no better than a trash heap.

Mobs ruled the streets. Common thieves were more trustworthy than the police employed to keep them in line. Those with money used it only to gain more, and you could only trust those whose personal goals aligned with yours—no matter how temporarily.

Enter Juno Steel, the unlucky soul chosen for tonight's dirty task.

He'd likely have been assigned due to being one of O'Flaherty's top hires, and an expert at dealing with conflict—when compared to the rest of his companions, that is. His chosen seconds were Alessandra, as always, and a woman whose name the thief above them couldn't recall.

They carried no weapons.

Their only defense was the man stalking them on the rooftops. He wasn't known by any one name—not consistently, at least. By any case, certainly not his true name. In the way genius tends to gain a calling card, the boy began to be referred to as the Nameless Thief.

Officially, of course, he wasn't a thief.

His contract, located in the desks of one Ms. Ingrid Lake, referred to him as a spider. Thus, "*Perseus Shah*" was employed for his skill as a spy. The thievery was more of a hobby; he'd been brought up thieving and he'd likely die underneath the weight of the gold and priceless art he'd acquired if he had anything to say about it.

Despite his career, the criminal's record was blank, but no conclusions should be drawn from this. He had exactly fourteen separate aliases currently registered on Mars, and only one had an offense registered. This was Kingsley Brook, and he'd been caught shoplifting four years ago.

Not one of these aliases was his real name.

His given name hadn't been Peter Nureyev, but it was his real one.

Not one person knew to call him by it—at least who was still breathing.

Recently, Peter had developed a habit of trailing Juno Steel. This had become rather unfortunate, as Juno was a lady who most likely wouldn't still be alive if about half of Hyperion City had anything to say about it.

Juno wasn't exactly… popular. Certainly not with the kind of people who didn't bother with morals, anyway. Unfortunately, those types made up the majority of the population in Hyperion City.

Peter crouched on a sturdier, less leaky rooftop in order to see what was going on. He couldn't hear well—in general, of course, but especially not from more than nine feet in the air—but he'd learned to read lips long ago. Volume wasn't an issue when people didn't cover their mouths, after all.

The only problem would be the distance, had he not stolen a pair of glasses designed for this exact purpose.

However, it turned out he didn't need any special knowledge to know what Juno had gotten up to; the moment Peter's eyes fell on him it was clear he'd started tossing quips out like laser bolts. The other people in the room glared and scoffed, successful only in encouraging him.

"Well, well, well," Peter saw the mob boss Brock Engstrom say. "Juno Steel, the philosopher crook."

"Well, you know what they say about getting to know people." Juno flashed a shrug that proclaimed to the world just how little he cared to be there. "It's like picking a lock, really. They say I'm famously awful at both."

Engstrom growled. "Stop speaking in metaphors."

"It's not a metaphor," Alessandra Strong (former soldier, current P.I., worked with Juno on several occasions, nothing worth stealing, twenty-one years old) cut in. "He's *really* bad at it."

"Shut it," Engstrom snapped. His nameless, faceless seconds had stayed perfectly silent the entire time, as the rules of parley demanded. Alessandra rolled her eyes and stepped back in surrender.

"Yeah, come on, Alessandra. I'm the only one allowed to insult my

terrible people skills.” Juno snarked. “Honestly, it's the stuff of legends.”

“Back to business.” Engstrom steepled his fingers. Once he’d been a great thief, but that was long ago. Now, he only profited off of his reputation and didn’t bother getting his hands dirty. A shame, really. Before he’d retired, Peter had almost admired him. “Listen here, Steel. You’re pretty new to the whole gig, so I’ll do you a favor and cut you some slack. It isn’t your fault you don’t know how politics work here in Hyperion.”

Juno blinked. “...I’ve lived here my entire miserable life.”

“That’s like, what, five years?”

“Oh, wow. *So* mature.”

“I can’t believe this. You’re a *teenager.”*

Juno wasn’t a teenager. He didn’t even look like one. From his research, Peter knew Juno was twenty-three. He himself was somewhere around twenty-one, give or take, but that had never made him any less of a master thief. “Only compared to you. Doesn’t mean I’m not right.”

“I don’t have time for this!” If there had been a table in front of him, Engstrom would have slammed his fists on it. Instead, he settled for snarling and pointing at Juno in accusation. “The Utgard Express belongs to all of us. Just because your pet thief—”

“Wait what?”

“—was the one who finally caught it doesn’t mean you have the right to—”

Juno groaned loudly. “Listen, buddy. I actually have *no idea* what the *hell* you're talking about. The only thief I employ is Rita, and she doesn’t count. The only thing she’s stolen would be some kind of salmon—”

“You know who I’m talking about, *Steel.”* One hand pointed at him in accusation. “Hiring a petty thief to take my rightfully-earned blueprints?” *Petty?!* Oh, *now* Peter was mad. *I do better work now than you’ve done in the last* decade, *Brock.* “It’s not right . It simply isn’t *done* .”

“Well,” began Juno as he examined his fingernails in mocking derision, “it’s not right that bump on your nose is easier to look at than the rest of your face, but there it is.”

Engstrom snarled. “Damn it, Steel, I’m trying here!”

Juno raised his hands in surrender. “Me too. In fact, I’m willing to leave here with as little as, oh, one or two artifacts?”

“Not. Happening.”

“Well, *someone* obviously has to be smart enough to relent. And I’ve gotten punched in the nose enough times for it to be *pretty* clear how senseless a lady can be if he *really* wants to.”

“Senseless is certainly one word for it.” The edge to his voice was as well buried as Peter Nureyev’s own past. “Listen here, *Steel,* because I won’t repeat this a second time.”

“What?” Peter couldn’t tell clearly, but Alessandra seemed to be rolling her eyes. She moved her mouth silently, mumbling *‘don’t mess with the man with no moral compass and a gun up his sleeve, Steel, Saints, this can’t be happening* again *,’* under her breath.

Engstrom evidently didn’t share his feelings. In all his years, Peter had never seen someone turn that color before. It was fascinating. “That was a threat.”

“Ooooh, I see. You think I care about death threats.” Behind him, Alessandra made a noise of concern. “Well, guess what, buddy? I take death threats with my seven cups of coffee every morning. Don’t do much but wake me up. So, really, I don’t care how many guards you’ve bribed—”

“Hold on, I never said anything about—”

Juno let out a *ha!* he’d evidently been soaking in frustration for at least the last few hours. “Shit, Engstrom, you’re losing your touch. You’ve been shooting looks up at that balcony this whole time.” He pointed at the building behind him without turning, letting his eyes bore into Engstorm’s furiously. “Waiting for the right time to give a signal, right?”.

“I’d watch my tongue, lady.”

“Yeah, well, I’m too busy watching where *you’ve* slipped up.” Juno

continued talking, but Peter didn't take particular note of whatever he said next, as he had a balcony to reach before the guard got any ideas. "In fact, you've been bribing this guard for a while. It's always useful to have someone on the inside, and Monrovian never got to give up that job, did he? His resignation notice wasn't accepted, and I know why."

Engstrom seemed far too smug for Peter's liking. He dug his hands into the stone of the wall, climbing faster. "I'd say you're going to regret ever having that information, oh, right about… now."

There was silence.

Engstrom blinked. "Monrovian?"

'Monrovian' made one last noise, then crumpled to the floor, knife wound slowly weeping blood.

"Wow, what useful bribes you've placed, Engstrom," Juno drawled. "What great goddamn use you've made of your spy here."

Crouching down so as to get a better view, Peter took out a handkerchief and began wiping his knife clean. *Disaster averted.* Engstrom had enough creds to bribe the other guard as well, of course, but Peter wouldn't worry about him. Rex Glass was a particular friend of his, after all.

The donation had been much appreciated.

Engstrom started stammering. "Spy? What—"

"You know, Engstrom, you're really out of practice," Juno continued despite the old man's protests. "In fact, I'm not sure you were ever good at this. You and Valencia here—that *is* her name, isn't it?" Engstrom flinched. "I'm pretty bad with names, but I'm pretty sure that's hers."

Valencia growled. "I will kill you slowly and painfully until you wish you had died right here."

"So much for a polite discussion," sighed Alessandra.

Juno snapped his fingers. "Yeah, her. You two have been meeting up for months now, and she's been in your employ for far longer than that. You didn't let her go; she's been your go-to spy for *years* . That's why she didn't have a tattoo. Still doesn't, right?" Juno jabbed a

thumb at her with a scowl. “Yeah, I know Grisha[1] work when I see it. Let me guess. Corporalki,[2] right? Good enough to Tailor herself a disguise? Probably not as good as you thought, if I could still smell you on her despite it.”

“Shut up,” barked Engstrom.

He snorted. “Sure, tell me to shut up now that I’m *exposing you.”*

“I’ve been telling you to shut up all evening, lady.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t listen to you, then.” Juno crossed his arms. “You’ve bribed the guards, cheated people out of hard-earned creds , and sent your *spy* to take even more than that. Being sloppy with it doesn’t mean you don’t pay for it. And I don’t just mean in cash,” he added, a triumphantly harsh note to his voice.

“What.”

Juno tapped his chin slowly, a blatant mockery of thought. “Well, let’s see. You’ve been taking business away, so I think ‘Lessandra’s client —”

“Hey, *you’re* the one who decided to get in on *my* case, but *whatever.”*

“—gets to make use of yours. Sound fair to you?”

“You’re insane.”

“No, I’m a detective.”

Engstrom fumed for several minutes, but acquiesced soon enough. “Fine. But be sure about one thing, Juno Steel. If I have anything to say about it, you’ll regret even coming here tonight. You’ll wish you’d never so much as heard of—”

“If you’re not going to tell me things I didn't already know, then I guess we’re done here.”

Peter only stuck around to make certain Engstrom didn’t try anything when Juno turned his back before leaping gracefully away.

Chapter End Notes

cover art by shelle seratlantisite rebloggable here

[1] Grisha: a person with the ability to manipulate a specific kind of matter/material. There are three branches, with different paths and specialities. [ back ]

[2] Corporalki: Refers to Grisha who control living matter. A Corporalki can choose to study one or two of the following: Tailoring, Heartrending, or Healing. Tailors can alter appearances, Heartrenders can attack/kill others with their abilities, Healers can... heal people. [ back ]

# juno

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite having won the night's battle, Juno still had the *worst* headache.

That was, really, almost all there was to note on the whole affair. Juno's head hurt, Benzaiten was dead, and the sky was gloomy and dark as ever, despite the slight blue tint of the dome. The street around him bustled with noise and people, just waiting for those like Engstrom to take advantage of.

There wasn't anything else. There was never anything else. Not that mattered, anyway.

(He used to dream about becoming a cop on the *stadwatch*[1] . A captain, maybe—the best in the business. He'd dream of cleansing Hyperion City of all the criminals and merchants of death constantly plaguing its streets. He'd wanted to make it into the safest town in the whole of—well, everywhere.)

(Those dreams had died with Benten.)

"Down on your luck? Need a hand?" It was one of Polaris Hotel and Casino's barkers, stationed there to lure tourists with too-heavy pockets right into the owner's waiting arms. "Enjoy a relaxing stay at Polaris for a hot meal and good odds for some big wins!"

Juno stared at the perfectly polished windows, the bright lights inside all but blinding him.

Rather, there was nothing that mattered but Ramses O'Flaherty, the only person keeping this damn city together.

Despite being a mercher, O'Flaherty used a significant amount of his money on the most drab, miserable places in Hyperion—namely Oldtown, where Juno and— *no.* Where *Juno* had grown up.

*Oh, get a hold of yourself, Steel. Snap out of it.* He was sentimental today. That couldn't last if he wanted to stay alive.

Although, really, that wasn't much of an argument to make.

Whatever. He had work to do.

When you couldn't escape the system, like Sasha Wire had, there was really no choice but to play the game to survive. And Juno had played so hard it hardly seemed worth it. Favored by the old man himself, he'd risen through O'Flaherty's ranks quicker than anyone dared expect. They did good work together. *Right?* At least, better than what people like the Kanagawas paid him to do, and that was what mattered.

*Creeeeak.*

Quicker than a centuries-old bullet through flesh, Juno had whipped his gun from its holster. It was pointed directly at the source; a lanky figure perched on a wooden plank high above. Juno very determinately *didn't* think about the very real chance he'd miss the target, like the last couple hundred times he'd tried.

"Alright, alright, you've got me." Juno said with a shrug. "What is it, you want creds? Because jumping someone in an alley is just *really* cliché."

There was no reply.

Juno rolled his eyes. "Alright, smart guy. You win. Go on, kidnap me or whatever. One Juno Steel, ready for the taking."

A single, surprised *ha!* from above. Then, the figure stood up and started running away across the rooftops.

"Oh, dammit, get back here!" Juno looked around for a way up, but the walls weren't fit for so much as an ant to crawl up, much less a bulky lady with more stubbornness than sense.

He grumbled under his breath before turning away from the stars and shining lights of Polaris Hotel—noticeably brighter than the former—and back towards his own dusty, bloodstained corner of Hyperion City.

He didn't make it three steps before he heard a garbage can clatter behind him.

When he turned around, however, there was no one there.

"Oh, come on," Juno taunted the empty alley. "The whole *shadow-lurking* deal was already overdone without *two people* doing it in the

span of *five minutes.”*

His only reply was the footsteps that seemed to appear and disappear. *A ghost?* His heart quickened, spooked by some nonsensical instinct not quite squashed. *Benzaiten?!*

Juno was completely sure in his terror until the needle plunged into his neck.

Everything went dark.

Just the way his mind always was.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Stadwatch: Police. Another name for the HCPD. [ back ]

# peter

Peter hated walking the streets of Hyperion.

He'd do it, of course. No self-respecting thief would dare the risk of falling through some mobster's rooftop, never mind the steeper climbs or puddles of suspicious yet slick oil.

But he didn't have to like it.

The alleyways were far too familiar than Peter would have liked; he'd already stayed in this hellhole of a city longer than he preferred. He'd arrived a month ago while still riding the high of a heist in Jupiter and hadn't thought to ask where the ship was headed.

Peter Nureyev hadn't grown up here, but he'd never exactly wanted to arrive.

Hyperion City had a way of sticking to your weaponized stilettos like barnacles on shipwrecks.

Ordinarily, he'd have robbed the wealthiest snob in town and left already, but something was off about this place. It was too blatantly cruel; no *truly* awful place could be that obvious about it.

Although maybe Peter was wrong about that.

*File it away, Peter. There's work to be done.* He shook himself internally before making for a nearby alley; one with walls coated in marks from long-forgotten brawls and broken glass from shattered liquor bottles making for more of a floor than the cobbled pavement.

A voice came from the corner of the alleyway, hidden in dramatic shadow. "Ah, Ransom. I was hoping you'd arrive."

Peter could have *sworn* he'd been careful enough. He'd checked behind him multiple times, and he hadn't been followed. More, he'd had to scale several buildings to even *get* here.

So really, how in the Saints' names did the woman know he'd be here?!

Peter cleared his throat, attempting for nonchalance. "And who, precisely, might you be?"

The woman let out a small laugh. It sounded far too candid to really be sincere. “Sit down, darling. I never give job offers while standing around. It feels so awkward and impersonal, don’t you agree?”

“A job?”

“Yes, do try and keep up.” The exasperation in her voice was enough to make Peter reflexively stand a little straighter. “Now, this is entirely optional, so feel free to refuse, but how would you like to earn four million creds?”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “Tell me more.”

The woman in the shadows grinned.

# juno

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juno came to with an enduring headache and a prominent sense of *what the hell.*

His eye blinked open to an unfamiliar room with a barely-familiar face looming over him. Juno had only ever seen him twice before—and really, once had been more than enough.

He had always been *far* too direct for Juno's tastes.

The big guy nodded a greeting. "Hello."

Juno groaned. The tranquilizer hadn't quite left his system yet, and it was giving him a killer case of brain fog. "...you're the guy from the Lighthouse mission."

"Indeed. I have made you tea."

"I don't want—"

"Ah, Juno. Good, you're awake." Juno had become acquainted enough with the woman entering the room to not immediately let out a groan, but it was a close thing. "My apologies for contacting you in this way, darling, but I'm afraid this isn't exactly business as usual."

"Buddy!" Juno raised his cuffed hands. "What the hell!"

"I'm sorry, Juno," replied Buddy Aurinko unapologetically, "but if I'd told you about our meeting word would have inevitably gotten out. There are only so many precautions one can take when arranging a time and place. Eventually it simply becomes far easier to surprise them."

"Yeah, easier for *you."*

"Exactly." Buddy sat down across from Juno, folding her hands on the desk in a universal *to-business* gesture. *Ghezen,* Juno hated business. And Buddy was one of his less-murderous clients. "Regardless, I would like to hire you for a job."

*Shocker.*

She waited, evidently, for Juno's protests. But Juno had already tried to turn down Buddy Aurinko once. That wasn't an endeavor he was willing to try again; the trouble refusing had caused him had been far too irritating.

He sighed. "Alright, but the same conditions stand. I don't kill anyone, you tell me everything up front, I—"

"Yes, yes, I'm fully aware. Let's get on with it, shall we?" From some drawer in the desk, Buddy pulled out a file and a pair of lock picks. She slid the latter across the table to Juno, who fumbled to catch it. *Hardly even know how to use the damn things.* "We're breaking into property belonging to one Nova Zolatovna. On Jupiter."

The picks fell from Juno's hands. "What the *hell?!" Oh, dammit!* The big guy materialized from *nowhere* to hand them back, and Juno *didn't* yell in shock, because he has *some* control over his life, *dammit.* "You're kidding, right?"

"I most assuredly am not," Buddy continued. *You could have just said no.* "We are going to free a very dangerous person from their cell, and we are going to get paid to do so."

"...is this an assignment or…"

"No, Juno. You can feel free to refuse as you see fit. I don't want anyone on my team who doesn't one hundred percent believe in our mission."

"Great, 'cause I'm out." The cuffs fell to the floor with a *clunk.* Juno stood up and made to walk away. "Have a nice life."

Buddy didn't seem surprised, but that didn't mean anything. She never looked surprised. Ghezen himself could appear and she'd look for all the world as if it had been anticipated all along. "It took me two hours to convince *him* —" She nudged the big guy fondly. "—to accompany me, Juno darling. The probability of achieving this and living through it is remarkably low, and you know I don't enjoy pondering that."

He halted in his tracks. "...you're serious?"

"As a master assassin already planning their mark's funeral."

Juno threw his head back and let out the exasperated groan he'd been

resisting. “Ugh, alright, you’ve got me. I’m interested.” He slumped back down into the chair, letting his arms fall to his sides.

“Excellent. Any more questions or can I count you in?”

“Hold on.” He sat up and jabbed a finger at Buddy. “Since *you* don’t have a death wish, why *did* you agree to this job?”

“Because to not do so would result in a far worse outcome.” Buddy gestured. “Follow me.”

“Not sure I can do that with what you shot me with still in my veins,” grumbled Juno, but he walked briskly behind nevertheless.

It didn’t take long for Juno to recognize the building. He may not have seen the room they’d just left before, but he’d visited the lighthouse plenty of times. The Council of Tides [1] had abandoned it years before, and not long after, Buddy and Vespa had taken over. They used to be legendary for their heists.

They hadn’t done any really big jobs since Vespa had gotten… well. Since Buddy had gotten cheated out of her ship in order to rescue her, years later.

Of course, Juno only knew that because of having been there.

The lighthouse stairs creaked dangerously as he followed up after her. His legs were beginning to complain dangerously loudly, threatening to hold a strike if he pushed them too hard. “Where are we going, anyway?”

From behind him, the big guy replied, “we are going up.”

Juno jumped with a shout. “*GAH!* Warn a gal next time, huh?!” When his heart rate returned to a good seventy-five beats per minute, he continued in a grumble, “you seem to have just about the whole crew here. Where’s the wife?”

Without slowing down *somehow,* Buddy replied, “Quite frankly, that’s none of your business.”

“…I’m being paid to be here.”

“Not yet you’re not, dear, and thank goodness for that. Your rates are far too high for a good first impression on potential clients.”

“Hey, a lady’s gotta eat.”

Rather than reply, Buddy opened a door and walked through it, as one normally does with doors. *You couldn't just explain what we're doing here?* Making goddamn sure both her and the big guy could hear his heels stomping on the floor, Juno entered after her.

Inside, sharpening one knife with no less than thirty more next to her, was Vespa Ilkay.

Juno didn't know much about Vespa. He only knew that he'd helped save her from a gangster's debt trap, and that Juno had gotten stabbed in the attempt. By Vespa. Apparently she didn't know how social interaction worked outside of combat because she growled and threatened people a lot. Not that Juno could fault her for that. He had the same damn problem. "Hey, Vespa. How's it, uhh, how's it hangin'? Are… are you going on the job?"

Vespa glared, not meeting his eye. "What's it to you?"

"Er, alright then." With one last noise of annoyance, Vespa stormed out of the room—but not before stopping to receive a kiss on the cheek from Buddy. Juno decided not to ask about her. "So. Who's the target, anyhow? Give me that fresh Jovian tea."

The big guy shook his head. "I cannot. I do not have any. If you would like, I could retrieve some from my store, if you would like."

"…no, I didn't mean—it's an old Earth expression."

"Suit yourself."

"It's a bit more complicated than that, I'm afraid. We will be going after a person."

"…what."

"You see, we have been hired to retrieve a weapons maker called M'tendere from—"

"Hold on, *the* M'tendere?" Even Juno, who'd made enemies of half the murder-loving crazies on Mars and made acquaintances of the others, had never wanted to arrange a meeting with *them*. "Arguably the deadliest person in the galaxy. We're breaking *them* out."

"Allow me to start over. I'm afraid it won't be any more convincing the second time around, but I'd like to think the context will help." Buddy sighed, running a hand through her hair. She didn't *look* like

she was kidding. *Shit.* “Several years ago, a woman who went by Miasma created a pill that could amplify Grisha power to a rather ridiculous degree. She called it the lysoniona capsule. She went insane upon using it, of course, and died in the attempt, but her plans survived. They were badly damaged by her Etheralki[2] powers, but the concept remained.”

Juno shuddered. “And people have been trying to recreate it ever since, because of *course* they have.”

“Eloquent, but yes. Dark Matters has been using M’tendere like this for years.”

Juno blinked. “Wait. Years?”

“It’s likely a sorry existence. The capsule has only been discovered recently—within the last, oh, six months—but they’ve been used to make weapons for far longer than that.”

“Sure, yeah, I can understand that, but didn’t M’tendere and the big guy—”

“I do not wish to talk about it.” It was the closest Juno had heard him to being furious. Juno clamped his mouth shut firmly.

Before continuing, Buddy spared Juno a dangerous glance, which communicated her message—which he frankly didn’t need—quite well. *Wasn’t planning on pressing, lady. Don’t need to tell* me *twice.* “Our employer has chosen to remain anonymous, but they have promised to pay thirty million creds upon delivery.”

“I—*what?!”*

Buddy sighed. “Yes, I’m afraid you heard me right. They contacted me through an exceedingly complicated series of hired messengers that even your Rita hasn’t been able to source. It’s fishy, I’ll admit.”

*Shit.* “This really seems like a scam, Buddy.” Nothing came free, especially not in this city.

“Yes, I thought so at first too. And then he provided our down payment.” She looked him dead in the eye. “Exactly what was promised.”

“Oh.” Juno‘s eye widened. “That doesn’t happen often.”

“No, darling, it does not.” It’s well known, if you’re involved in less than legal business—and virtually everyone was—that the best employers tend to consider cheating their way out of payment a cruel kind of sport. If you don’t get a few hundred false creds in your check, you’re lucky. Whoever paid must have been some combination of stupid and desperate; likely both.”

“So, Pilot Pyrera?”

She tilted her head. “It’s possible, though out of character.”

Frowning, the big guy shook his head. “They tend to conduct their business without anonymity, if not publicly. It would be *extremely* out of character.”

Juno furrowed his brows. “Well, it’s not Ramses, so—”

“The subject of our employer is only relevant if you’re a part of the job, Juno, so I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to kindly drop it.” He did, but not without making a mental note. Juno always loved a good mystery. “In short, we’ll be breaking M’tendere from their cell and bringing them to our employer safely before Dark Matters can say ‘where are you going with our prisoner?’ Does that sound satisfactory or should we be worried about finding another person with your skills?”

Objectively, it was a bad idea. Juno didn’t even need to look hard for excuses or reasons not to agree. He didn’t exactly want to be on Dark Matters’ kill list—although that was really more for Sasha’s sake than his—and he didn’t fancy a life in some Outer Rim prison. And that was provided he *survived* the damn job.

Honestly, though? That only made it more appealing.

*At least it’s not getting Maia King’s cat out of another goddamn tree.*

“Oh, what the hell. I’m in.”

“Excellent!” Buddy clapped her hands. “We’ll be meeting at the spaceport at dawn. We’re leaving on the *Carte Blanche.* I’ll send the details to your comms. Until then, though, *do* stay for a cup of tea. He makes a *truly* excellent Jovian decaf.”

“I thought you couldn’t—”

“I have a nose, dear.”

“Ah, okay then. I suppose I can’t turn that down?”

“*Absolutely* not.”

Chapter End Notes

[1] Council of Tides: Powerful group of Tidemakers (waterbenders) who, in Six of Crows, monitor the harbor and monitor trade. Why they’d come to Mars, I have no clue. Suppose *someone* has to make sure there’s enough water to go around. [ back ]

[2] Etheralki: Basically element benders. Think Avatar rules. They can control air, fire, or water—Squallers, Inferni, and Tidemakers respectively. [ back ]

# peter

Before leaving for the job, Peter had a small item on his list he wanted to check off.

That small item?

A particularly valuable sapphire—Vulcan's Sapphire, to be exact—currently residing in one Brock Engstrom's study.

He'd memorized the floor plan in advance, obtained a copy of the guard rotations, frozen the alarm for precisely six minutes and thirty-four seconds, and really everything afterwards had been easier than if the man had just *handed* the jewel to Peter. Honestly, for a thief in retirement, the man's security was *truly* awful.

So he'd just crawled out of the ventilation shaft, entering the VIP garage just when he'd planned when he'd caught sight of a trench coat and scowl pacing the port floor. He frowned in confusion. *What's Juno doing here?*

And that's when the alarm went off.

*Shit.* Twelve feet away from him, Juno startled at the sound, looking around in confusion. The perfect scapegoat. Peter started running. "Er, what the hell?!"

Engstrom's voice came over the loudspeaker. *"Stay put! You'll pay for this, Juno Steel!"*

Juno Steel, who would certainly *not* be paying for anything, seemed no more enlightened than before. "Okay, what in the—"

Peter bowled into Juno with all the speed he'd wanted but none of the control. Juno barely managed to catch him before he hit the ground."Come with me. Quickly."

"Who in the hell—" He broke off. "You were on the rooftop! Why the hell were you—"

Peter's brain spun. *How did he recognize me?* "We don't have time for this now, Juno, let's get out of here."

Juno stared. He still wasn't moving, despite the *obvious danger.* "How do you—"

“You’re very popular, now can we *go?*”

Peter extended his hand. There was a moment’s hesitation, Juno’s face unreadable, before he cursed under his breath. “Ah, what the hell.” He gripped Peter’s gloved hand in his own, far rougher than Peter had anticipated. It wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

They ran off at a sprint.

Between heavy breaths, Juno protested, “My car’s the other way—”

“Is your car the best escape vehicle in the galaxy, Juno?” Juno, eyes wide, shook his head. “No, we have other plans.” Peter pointed at the car he’d been eyeing since he entered Engstrom’s property. “Do you see that car over there?”

“The violently green one? Yeah, what about it?”

Peter let himself grin in response. He’d been waiting for this since he was four. “That’s our ride.”

Juno squinted. “You sure? It’s a real bright shade. Stands out.”

“Oh, you’ll see.”

They made it over to the Ruby Seven without getting shot. Peter opened the door, they shuffled in, and Juno slammed the door behind them. Oh, if only they had the time for a discussion about manners...

“Oh, hello, beautiful,” Peter breathed as the car turned on. He wiggled his fingers in anticipation. Oh, this would be *fun.*

“Are you talking to the car?”

“It’s the *Ruby Seven,* Juno, now show some respect.”

“I don’t care what it’s called, I care about making our escape.”

Peter let himself laugh as he started the car and began pulling out. “Oh, and we will be doing *just* that.”

“Good.” Juno suddenly frowned. “Er, and you are—”

“Glass.” Engstrom was shooting at the car; he didn’t have time to think of a good one. His most recent alias would have to do. “Rex Glass, if you please.”

“Uh, sure. So, Glass. You sure you know how to work this thing?!”

“Don’t worry!” Peter patted the steering wheel. “We know just what we’re doing, don’t we, girl?” Ruby—*the Ruby Seven*—gave a few happy beeps in reply.

“Your talking to the car isn’t exactly reassuring!”

“Relax, Juno. I have this.” An enemy vehicle swerved directly at him. He veered out of its path and out of the garage before doing a barrel roll to avoid crashing through a window of a floating mansion. Juno yelled out in fear. “...at least, I do now.”

“We’re going to die.”

“From what I heard, for you, that’s a positive.”

“Shut up and *drive* , Glass!”

Peter allowed himself one last affirmative before focusing on their escape. The Ruby handled like a dream come true; each turn was smoother than he could have ever imagined. She was, quite possibly, the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Juno was starting to look a little ill.

“We’re not losing them!”

Peter did a loop de loop just for the fun of it. “Let the car worry about that, Juno.”

Juno made a sick sound. He took a breath. “It's a *car,* it can’t—”

“Oh, ye of little faith.” He cleared his throat—more for the dramatic effect than of actual need. “Ruby: calculate optimal escape scenario.”

The Ruby Seven made an affirming beep. Juno, still a little pale, scoffed. “What’s a *car* gonna do about—”

“Hush, Detective. She’s concentrating.”

“Oh for the *love—”*

A triumphant beep before a phrase appeared on the screen—the name of a maneuver. *PEREGRINE RELAY.* Well. Peter certainly had *heard* of it, but he hadn’t *tried* it before without crashing.

He told this to Juno.

*“What?!”*

“Well. I suppose we don’t have a choice in the manner. Hold on!”

The *Peregrine* consisted of a staggering series of loops, hairpin turns, flipping upside-down once, and causing a not-insignificant traffic jam. Peter thoroughly enjoyed himself. Juno didn’t seem to be doing the same.

Nevertheless, they made it. Not long after, a lone explosion was all that was left of their tail.

“Excellent job, Ruby!” The Ruby Seven let out a series of happy whistles that only served as fuel for Juno’s impertinent scowl. “So, Juno. Wherever might you be headed?”

Juno groaned loudly, still visibly pale. “What?”

“I’d be happy to drop you off before heading to the spaceport.”

“I—yeah, I’m headed there too. Got a message to go to Engstrom's first though. Anonymous.”

“Huh.” Peter furrowed his brow in concern. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Juno eyeing him with suspicion aplenty, but he dropped it. “*Do* tell me when you see your crew.”

But Juno didn’t say a word. Not one of the ships appeared to belong to him; if he recognized any of the people, they weren’t who he had been looking for. Peter had all but dropped Juno off in the middle of the spaceport to find his own way around when the lady finally reacted.

“There, I see them. You can let me out now.”

*... hold on.* Something was off. “Er, you wouldn’t mean the crew with the couple in green and red, would you?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s my stop as well.”

“...what the hell.”

Peter shrugged. “You *do* know what they say about chance meetings, don’t you? Here’s hoping we haven’t completely wasted ours.”

Juno glared at him, then snapped out of it. “Wait, hold on.” He did a

double take at the extremely small woman. “Is that *Rita?!”*

Peter blinked. “Who?”

“My secretary.” Juno leaned out of the window before beginning to yell loudly, “*Hey Rita!”*

An even louder, more shrill voice answered. “Boss!”

Juno leapt out of the car to talk to this ‘Rita’ without so much as a goodbye. Buddy Aurinko—and that was *the actual Buddy Aurinko*—looked almost taken aback at the two arriving together, but she seemed to brush it away. “Is that the Ruby Seven you’ve procured for us, darling?”

“That it is!” Peter replied gleefully. “She handles *wonderfully.* I think I’m in love.”

The big man standing in front of the ship eyed the Ruby Seven thoughtfully. ”I suppose I should thank you for returning to me my car. I owe you a great debt. In this case, I will pay it off by not killing you for driving my car unsupervised.”

“...Er, thank you?”

“You are quite fortunate. If the Ruby Seven did not respond to your commands adequately, you would have died simply driving it out of the garage. You will not do it again.”

Well then. This job seemed to be starting off quite smoothly.

# juno

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juno's list of regrets was in need of an update.

A massive update.

And this time, he'd pulled *Rita* into it all!

They'd only just left Mars, and already Juno felt unsteady without the sewers and sand beneath his feet. The profound sense of weightlessness that came from looking back at the rust and neon of his home planet shook him to his freshly-abandoned core.

"It's only for a little while," chirped Rita from beside him. Her own eyes were a bit misty, but otherwise she seemed fine. "We'll be back soon enough, just you wait! The whoooole of Mars won't know what hit 'em!"

"Yeah, you're right," Juno sighed. She usually was anyways. "But hey, uhh, Rita, you sure about this?" He rubbed the back of his neck before clarifying, "I mean about the job, not leaving Mars."

She didn't even hesitate. "O'course I'm comin' with ya, boss! I'm your most bestest friend in the whole whole world, no matter what Mista Mercury says!"

"Aw, you really do care." Juno had almost started feeling good about the whole situation until Rita reached up and tried to ruffle his hair. "Okay, what the hell?"

"I wanted to give you a hug, but you said not to—"

"Not without *warning,* Rita. This is *far* weirder. Please, just." He sighed. "Don't."

A note of some emotion he couldn't place in her voice, Rita replied, "got it."

"Good." Juno ran a hand through his hair. "That was almost as weird as you calling me 'Juno'."

“Yea, you’re right, boss.” She patted his shoulder. “Won’t happen again!”

The Big Guy approached them, face unreadable and jacket brown as ever. “Hello. Are you prepared?”

“No, I’m Rita!”

He didn’t look put off by Rita’s… Rita-ness. “I am aware. My name is Jet Sikuliaq.”

Juno spluttered. “I’m sorry?!”

“Nice to meet ya, Mistah Jet!”

“Is this for real?” Juno asked the air. The air didn’t reply, because it didn’t give a damn.

Rita and… *Jet*… began an amicable discussion Juno felt too bitter to participate in. He stalked off dejectedly. His boots made loud noises against the floor with every step he took. This should have kept people he didn’t want to talk to at bay, but no. In fact, the very person he wished *most* to avoid popped up right in front of him. “Ah, Juno!”

“Oh, come on.” Juno shook his head, letting out a loud groan. “You?! You’re *actually* in on this.”

“Don’t be rude, Detective.” ‘Glass’ grinned like a knife. He looked just as charming and dangerous as before. “You know me.”

“That’s the point, I really don’t—”

“Exactly.”

Juno resisted the urge to strangle him.

Buddy cleared her throat. “This is Mr. Ransom, or at least what he has requested us to call him. He’ll be our spider for this mission.”

*Seriously?!* An exasperated laugh escaped Juno’s mouth. “I can’t believe this.”

“Whatever could be hard to believe about this, Juno?”

Well, a lot. It was *some* coincidence, this skyscraper-legged man popping up from every shadow Juno passed. His long hair was braided, his teeth sharpened to a noticeable degree, his grin crooked

and irritating. If Juno squinted and forgot about the borderline kidnapping, he could almost be handsome.

*Hah.*

“A whole damn lot, that’s what.” Juno took a step closer to Not-Glass. “Okay, er. Well. It’s been a real blast, but we’ll just be leaving now.”

Before anyone had time to respond, Juno grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the room. The thief only raised an eyebrow in response. “Why, detective, how forward of you.”

“Cut it, Ransom, or whatever your name is.” Juno shoved a closet open and pulled him inside. “Why do you keep following me?”

His eyes widened, but something about it seemed rehearsed, fake. Juno didn’t feel remorseful in the damn *slightest* . “I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean.”

“Engstrom. Kanagawa. Even goddamn Morales.” His voice slipped into a growl. “You’ve been on my trail for *months* now, and I want to know *why.”*

“Well, I suppose it’s simple, isn’t it?” ‘Ransom’ delicately extracted Juno’s hands from his coat, causing Juno to flush at the touch. *Yeah, that’s right, buddy. It’s all* your *fault.* “I think that we can help each other, Juno.”

The thief pronounced his name as if it were something he could get used to saying in all sorts of other settings. It wasn’t exactly… unpleasant. However, it *was* just… *incredibly* distracting, and right then Juno didn’t really care for that. “We can *what.”*

“Well, as with most of the poor souls in this pit of a city, I’m bound here by monetary obligations it would be too risky for me to abandon unsettled. You have made acquaintances I have been unable to in the short time I’ve been in this city, and that is precisely what I need.” When Juno blinked, the thief continued, “I’ve taken on an indenture[1] with Ingrid Lake.”

“You’re—*who?”*

“Not in the way you’re thinking,” he clarified hurriedly. “I’m paid for spying on her rivals—including you, evidently—as well as a spot of light thievery, not for parading on her stage or *killing* anyone.” He didn’t say the word like someone who hadn’t offed anyone before. It

didn't help Juno's image of him. "She has to stay in business *somehow."*

"Ah." Juno felt mildly sick. The images burned in his mind from his last encounter with Lake did anything but help matters. "And I can help you… how?" *Isn't the money we're getting enough?*

He clicked his tongue. "Well, Ms. Lake certainly doesn't want me leaving her employ. She'll do whatever necessary—including, it's becoming very likely, killing me."

"*What.*"

"You'd be surprised. Most find my skills to be *quite* invaluable, and would rather see my blood spilled than my talents in the hands of another." His eyebrows raised. "I *am* quite the asset, Juno."

"Quit bragging."

"Instantly. Simply put, I want you to purchase my indenture."

Juno blinked. "...what?"

"You seem to be the only remotely trustworthy person I could give the task to, Juno. At the very least, the only one I could stand being in debt with." He waved his hands in the air, punctuation to the sentences he'd been gesturing. "You'll borrow the money from your O'Flaherty or take it from your cut, I'll repay you once the job is done, and we'll go our separate ways. Your thoughts will never have to linger on my handsome visage again."

"Seems you're making an awful lot of assumptions there for someone who hasn't even told me his name yet," grumbled Juno into his glass.

"Well, it's a secret."

"What kind of a name—"

He sighed an over-the-top sigh. "My anonymity is one of my most valuable assets, Juno. It would take someone truly special to gain that knowledge, which is quite possibly my only weakness."

*Oh, so he's a* theatrical *thief. Yeah, right.*

"It's Peter. Peter Nureyev."

*Wait what.*

“You—did you just—”

The door burst open, and Jet’s stoic face met them. “It is time. You will follow me to the deck now, where we will be reviewing our plan again.”

Juno stole one last look at Nureyev.

He didn’t seem to be regretting a word.

In fact, he seemed almost smug.

*Goddamn handsome thief.*

Chapter End Notes

[1] Indenture: A legal binding document used to repay services from one to another. Think Vespa’s contract, only for money instead of “you’ll die Less Early”. Like Vespa’s, it can be bought or paid off, and they’re usually unfairly skewed against the worker, designed to keep them legally bound for as long as possible. [back]

# peter

The next week passed *exceedingly* slowly.

All the members aboard the *Carte Blanche* appeared to already have ways to pass the time. Buddy Aurinko and her wife Vespa seemed attached at the hip, reviewing their plan over and over again until Peter had it memorized simply by being in the same room as them. Jet Sikuliaq—and in all honesty, Peter still hadn't gotten that fact through his head—made repairs to the *Ruby Seven* until he didn't have an excuse to sit on its deck and ponder whatever he was pondering. Rita put on puppet shows and chatted amiably in Juno's ears.

And Peter…

He applied and reapplied his makeup, checking over his supplies, made sure his accent was perfect.

Once, he almost caught himself thinking about Mag; namely, how he'd talked about the people Peter had just started *working* with. *Legends in crime,* he'd called them. If he'd known Peter were in the same room with *Buddy and Vespa,* he would hav— *nononono.*

Thinking about him was a… a mistake.

He couldn't afford to let it happen again.

*File it away, Peter. For future consideration.*

*You have work to do.*

Somewhere near the end of their voyage, Buddy Aurinko gathered the crew in what served for a kitchen to discuss their plans for what wasn't the first time. Her crew were close enough to their destination that the temperature was just slightly too cold to don the typical style of loungewear Peter preferred, but he made do.

Not one person was sitting still. Both Rita and Juno had sheets of paper, and while Rita was furiously drawing with the energy of taking notes, Juno appeared to be playing Square Box Lines against himself with his. His leg was bouncing up and down, shaking the table, and Peter wanted nothing more than to put a hand on his knee so as to cease the intrusive vibrations. Jet's fingers were rapping against the table. Buddy's hands were steepled, tapping her fingers against each

other as she surveyed them all with something unreadable. Vespa was building a house of cards, but had replaced the cards with knives.

Peter had taken out one of his own knives and was twirling it around his fingers idly. Juno, seeing this, had abandoned his game and started staring at its movement with blatant awe.

*Interesting.*

As what tends to happen when a group of people secure in their abilities gather around each other, what starts out as a briefing turns into an almost normal conversation. Buddy hasn't made an attempt to rein them in yet, and nobody seemed interested in stopping.

"There's *no way* you could crush a watermelon in one hand."

Jet shrugged. "It has happened before. It was an accident, so I apologized and cleaned up the mess. It was very sticky."

"Yeah, but still. You're a big guy, Big Guy, but not *that* big."

"I have done many months of strength training. It is not as difficult as you might think. One needs only persistence and a helpful attitude towards pain."

"Wow. You're making it sound like even *I* could shoot up ten feet and grow muscles the size of my head. Guess I better start squeezing some grapes."

"What are grapes?"

An ache had started building in Peter's temples.

"Can we not get to business?" He demanded. "*Some* of us have blueprints to memorize."

Vespa snorted. The sound shook the knife-house in front of her. "Oh, boo hoo, so he's *busy."*

"Excuse me?"

"What makes you think you belong here, huh?"

Peter let out a defensive laugh. "Why, I'm not sure what you mean."

"An interesting resume you had," Vespa continued without sparing him so much as a glance.

Peter gripped the knife in his hand, stopping its motion. “I’ve stolen *countless* artifacts. Committed crimes across *galaxies.* Once, I conned the Monarch of Io, pretending to be a security adviser for *five months* in order to steal xir prized jewel collection—and xir security checks are *universally renowned* .”

“Oh yeah?” Vespa growled. “Sounds *real* lucrative. Shoulda set you up for life, if you’re smart. So if it ain’t for the money, *Ransom,* I gotta ask. You here for a reason? Or is it just stupidity?”

*You have no idea the kind of debt I’m in.* Struggling to maintain his cool posture, Peter blurted out, “I’ve committed tax fraud.” *Oh, of all the—*

Not sounding at all impressed, Buddy all but sighed. “Not one person here hasn’t, Ransom.”

Peter flushed in shame. He considered introducing the knife in his hand to his ribcage in order to put a swift end to his misery, but soon remembered his thick layers of foundation would hide the blood in his cheeks. The only thing that would be hurt beyond repair was his pride, and while it was slightly too large to fold away, he could take care of it all the same.

Rita slowly raised her hand. “Miss Buddy? I’m pretty sure I haven’t.”

“That’s because you could never do anything wrong, darling.”

Juno frowned. “Wait, I haven’t either.”

Buddy Aurinko looked him in the eye and said, “dearest, that’s because you used to be a cop.”

Peter laughed quite loudly, an inelegant *ha!* that caused everyone around him to stare. *Oh, how mortifying!* He hadn’t spent years practicing his laugh in mirrors for—

“Hey Ransom, you doing some kind of overdramatic internal monologue or are you gonna give us your input?”

In an instant, he’d halted his harangue about how the Saints should just strike him down now rather than to allow him to continue on like this and replied, “well, you’re clearly the one to talk, Juno. I caught you bemoaning the state of Hyperion City on the deck only this dawn.”

“Go on and call me out like that, why don’t you?”

Vespa groaned, far louder than the situation called for. “Oh, quit the goo-goo eyes already and *shut up!”*

Her knife house collapsed. Loud clanking noises filled the room as daggers clattered to the table, making Nureyev flinch.

“Thank you, Vespa.” Buddy sounded tired. “Now. We don’t have believable enough aliases to enter via the party, so—”

“How viable must these aliases be?” Peter cut in.

She blinked. “Well, extremely.”

“I believe I could arrange something.” Everyone in the room stared openly at him. *Really, are they truly so used to working with ingrates?* Were he not a paragon of grace and elegance, he would have shrugged. As it were, Peter leaned back and waved a hand in an approximation of the gesture. “I have powerful friends. It pays to never leave home without at least four spare passports.” *It’ll be a relief to know that at the very least* I’ll *be doing my assigned portion of the work.*

“And I thought Vespa was paranoid,” Juno said, wide-eyed.

Vespa jabbed her knife in his direction, snarling. “Don’t make me use this.”

“Alright, then. That’s enough.” Buddy shot a glance at Vespa before continuing. “We’ll be entering through the party and making our way towards the prisons, where M'tendere is being held. Juno will cause the first distraction.”

“Ooh, when are we gonna do *crimes?”* Rita rubbed her hands together excitedly. “It’ll be just like in *Sharks In Venice Four: Destruction of Dragon City* , when Terraria decides she finally wants to become a burglar along with their girlfriend, who’s also a shark because of *course,* so they break into—”

It was all too easy to tune Rita out. Her rambling was truly soothing to the ear, if punctuated with the occasional inconvenient screech. Juno had abandoned his paper in favor of closing his eye and drumming his fingers on the table. Rita’s presence, oddly, seemed to calm him, though he remained restless. The movement of Juno’s fingers almost annoyed Peter more than the earlier foot tapping; in that moment, he wanted nothing more than to grab Juno’s hand and hold it still.

“Ransom?” *Damn.* Buddy’s tone was more clipped than normal. “Are

you paying attention or do you already know what our plan is?"

Flushing slightly, Peter shook himself until he could register the room around him clearly. "No, Captain, I'm listening."

After one last side glance at Peter, Buddy went over the rest of the plan. Then she went over the back-up plan. By the time she was finished, a tightly woven net of side-plans was ready to catch them should they fail.

If everyone remembered to follow them.

"More than anything else, though, remember to stay vigilant. Don't feel limited to the plan. Use your charm, your wit, to improvise and find success." Buddy Aurinko's eye focused on each of them in turn, radiating charisma and belief. "I believe in you all. Do *not* mess up."

*If one of them messes up,* Peter thought with a snort, *it won't be* my *fault.* Indenturement had taken quite a bit more than his carefree optimism from him, and jobs like these certainly didn't come easy.

He couldn't afford failure.

The *family meeting* was dismissed, and immediately Juno began making a beeline for him. This wasn't the first time this had happened. Ever since their conversation in that closet, Juno had been attempting fruitlessly to score an encore.

A *pointless* encore.

But, of course, he couldn't avoid Juno forever. The lady had, without saying a word, pulled him into a side room—the kitchen—and blocked the door with his body.. "Listen, Nureyev."

"I'll thank you not to utilize that name in front of the crew, detective. I quite enjoy my anonymity and would very much like to keep it intact."

"I'm not a—whatever." Juno looked away. His hands fidgeted in front of him, and Peter almost wanted to take hold of them. He didn't, because that would be rude as well as uncalled for, but he considered it briefly before filing it away. "I get it, you're some kinda super thief who can't share his real name. Whatever. But if you like the pseudonym gig that much, why deviate? Why risk it like that?"

*Because I don't have a choice.* He couldn't say that, though. Instead, he

just raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps I just enjoy the aura of intrigue the mystery provides.”

Juno shook his head. “No, it can’t just be an aesthetic thing.” *Aesthetic?* The *nerve* on this lady. “If it were, you wouldn’t specifically tell me not to tell the crew. I get you need me to buy your indenture or whatever, so you’ve gotta tell me sooner or later, but why *now?”*

The answer came to him easier than either of them expected. “Because I trust you, Juno.”

Juno stared for a long moment before replying in a cracked voice, “Why?”

*Why indeed.* In the deepest parts of his mind, Nureyev wished he knew. The rest of him scoffed in reply. It didn’t matter.

If his plan worked, he’d never have to see Juno Steel again.

“Because I believe in your abilities, your judgement, your will? Because I have no other option? Perhaps because it’s one part of my elaborate plan to be rid of you once and for all?” He waved a hand around without breaking eye contact. “Pick an answer that satisfies you. In truth, I’m not entirely sure why you, but I’m sure you’ll prove me right soon enough.”

Juno snorted. “*That* sounds likely.”

“Well, you’re allowed your opinion.” Peter went to leave. “If you’ll excuse me?”

Blinking, Juno protested angrily. “Hold on, I’m not finished with you.”

“Good. I’m truly looking forward to whatever you have planned.”

He sidestepped past Juno and into the hall. Despite the escape from the conversation, it was a while longer before his thoughts ceased their laser focus on Juno Steel.

See, Peter hadn’t exactly been *honest* with Juno.

That, in itself, was unsurprising. He lied to at least three people before breakfast each day—more, if he could. He even had quite a bit of practice in lying to himself.

Denial was one of the talents he’d spent quite a lot of time honing.

And so, he didn't feel particularly bad about concealing a bit from the nosy, moody lady who he happened to be working beside.

His research had supported this decision. Juno was quick to make enemies and quicker to cast judgement. He'd made an enemy of the majority of Hyperion City, and that wasn't even the half of it. The only reason Peter had told him his name was because there was no possible way he would make the connection. It was a fool who stayed on one planet for their entire life, when there was a whole *galaxy* to explore and see. And Juno Steel was a fool.

But still an *intriguing* fool.

So, after all that, why did he *really* trust Juno Steel?

Honestly? Peter couldn't say even if he wished to.

# juno

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rita, who adored all things stream-related, had delighted in the task of costuming the crew. According to her long, enthusiastic rant at the assignment, Frannie did… well, something clothes-related. She hadn't exactly been clear about the specifics. Regardless, a series of outfits had been secured, each tailored to a crew member's specifications.

This was too bad.

Juno had *really* been craving a good whining session.

"Oh, come on, Buddy." Juno groaned before twisting to examine the exact diameter of the dress. "Why does this dress have to be so… circular? Wide?" He did an experimental twirl. It was a pretty good twirl. Nice skirt for it.

"More room to smuggle M'tendere with, darling."

He blinked. *What?* "Oh, no, there's *no* way—"

"I was joking, Juno." Buddy certainly hadn't *looked* like she was joking; although there *was* a spark of humor in her eye. Her suit was close to charcoal in color, with accents of ruby and topaz. It was okay, it was *really* cool. "We have an outfit and papers for them. Learn to laugh a little. Good for the lungs."

Juno frowned. "Thought that was breathing."

"That's preposterous. If anything, breathing is negatively impactful on the lungs. All that stretching simply can't be good for one's health."

"It was a joke." Juno swished the skirt of his gown around, which was a pale silver. The sleeves were made of delicate lace, one wrong movement from tearing. *Isn't Neptune, like, really cold?* More than that… "Don't you need to breathe to live?"

Before their banter—or perhaps potential argument—could continue, Nureyev entered the room with all the grace of one who knows all eyes are on him and rather prefers it that way.

He really hadn't pulled any stops in the making of his dress. Perfectly tailored to emphasize his figure, the dark silver dress only hooked on one of Nureyev's shoulders. The skirt had a slit down the side to allow a wider range of motion—because he'd have to climb a lot, of course—and there was an ornate, bejeweled barrette in his braided hair.

It all seemed kind of detrimental to his whole *disappearing act,* but Juno couldn't find it in him to really mind.

When he could speak at last, the first words out of Juno's mouth were, "I figured you for a suit guy."

Nureyev seemed to shake himself before waving a hand around. "Suit jackets are *so* restrictive on the arms. Impractical for thievery. Although, if you'd rather I wore a tuxedo, I'd rather hope you'd be the one paying for it."

"Uh huh." Nureyev's arms were exposed, save for the long gloves that went to his elbows. He certainly had the biceps for scaling buildings. *I can think of some things I'd like to see you in.*

Buddy stood up and went to rap on Rita's door. "Darling, are you alright in there?"

"Uh huh!" There was a loud *crash!* from within. If Juno hadn't known her for years, he'd be concerned, but one learned to not question Rita. "Just wonderin' how you knew my size was all, but then again you seemed real prepared for this endeavor, Miss Buddy, so actually never mind all that!"

Rita stumbled out in a dusky orange suit jacket and hot pink skirt that curved around her hips. Its matching top was cropped just short enough you could see a little skin, but not enough that it was too scandalous for even the most traditional Venusian.

"Wow, it's beautiful! Whaddaya think, Boss?" She twirled, and her skirt flared out around her. "Ain't I just the prettiest Rita you've ever seen?"

"You're certainly something," Juno muttered, unsure why exactly he was smiling. Rita beamed at him, then grabbed her comms and ran out of the room.

Vespa emerged next, tugging at the jacket of her not-quite-neon suit with a grimace. The sleeves seemed a bit large, and the body a bit tight—although that might have just been her hidden knife collection.

“Anybody got a needle?”

Juno raised his eyebrows. “Sorry, knife club leader, we’ve got the wrong kind of Tailor for that.”

Buddy shot him a chiding glance before walking over to greet her probably-wife. “Vespa. My dear, you look absolutely radiant.” Whether or not that was true, her glower sure was— *at least until it disappeared,* remarked Juno as the expression was overtaken by a flush. “I’m sure Jet can adjust whatever you need.”

“Jet Sikuliaq can do what, now?” Nureyev asked from where he stood with arms crossed lazily, leaning against the wall.

“I know how to sew,” replied the big guy from *right behind Juno*, where he *certainly* hadn’t been a *damn second* ago. “I have many hobbies.”

“Jeez, give a lady a warning next time, won't you?!” Juno clutched his chest. If Nureyev laughed at him, he refused to acknowledge it. “You’ll give me a goddamn heart attack.”

“I will make some tea. If anyone else wishes to have some, please say so now.” His suit was simple, yet effective. Its color scheme of vivid violet and reddish magenta would have paired well with Buddy’s outfit, but clashed *horribly* with Rita’s—who he was *actually paired with*—when she ran back in to give him a quick hug and yell about how fantastic everyone looked and how *fancy* they were gonna be, and *wow boss ain’t it exciting?!* “The correct answer is yes. I make excellent tea.”

Buddy nodded to him gratefully. “One for my Vespa, please.”

“I would like one as well.” Nureyev shot Juno a smile filled to the brim with shining teeth. Jet and Rita took that moment to exit. “I’ll be giving our favorite damsel here a makeover, seeing as he’s easily recognizable by, oh, approximately half of Hyperion City.”

“Sucks to be you, then,” mumbled Juno. “At least I’m famous.”

“Oh, there are plenty of different kinds of fame, Juno. I tend to prefer mine. More private that way.” *Was he flirting?* It seemed like he was flirting. Nureyev set a hand delicately on his shoulder, and something in his brain stuttered momentarily. “Shall we retire to your rooms, detective?”

The ship wasn't big enough for it to be a significant walk.

"Still not a detective," Juno grumbled in lieu of speaking one of the many frantic thoughts currently running races in his mind.

"Well." Nureyev gestured at the doorway upon their arrival. "Ladies first, I suppose."

*Where did he even dig up that damn near* ancient *saying?* Nevertheless, Juno only shot Nureyev a deadpan stare before acquiescing.

His room was… not great.

Of course, it would have been worse, had they spent more than a week onboard the ship, but especially for that amount of time the amount of trash scattered about was impressive. Spare bottles lying around, bed unmade, sheets on the floor. It was a wonder neither of them tripped walking in.

"Oh, Juno…"

Juno sighed. "Yeah, well, you know what they say about rooms reflecting people."

A frown crossed Nureyev's face.. "I thought that was mirrors. Or desks."

"Well, those are awful too. Can you get on with it?"

The crease in his brows vanished. "Of course, of course." Nureyev swept over to grab a chair. A coat had been slung over it carelessly, and he had to take a moment to fold and set it on the table instead. "Sit down on the bed there, will you?"

With a smirk, Juno raised an eyebrow. "My, so forward. What would Buddy say about this?"

Nureyev waved the hand not lifting the chair. "Oh, hush, you."

"Nah, I'm good."

"I'm serious. I need to focus here." He pulled a tailoring kit from *absolutely nowhere* and opened it. "White, auburn, aubergine—decisions, decisions."

"Can't I choose what color you dye my hair?"

“There’s no accounting for taste, so it’s best I make the choice. We have to be *seen* together, after all.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

Nureyev made a noise of absolute triumph. “Aha!” He pulled a small metal tin from the kit, wasting no time in popping it open. “Now, if you’ll hold still for me but a moment?”

Juno obeyed, and got a tin full of powder shaken over him for his troubles.

“What in the—”

“It’s pigment, Juno, to alter the coloring of your hair, now let me concentrate.”

Against his better judgement, Juno did. He shut his mouth and tried not to breathe as Nureyev used his Corporalki powers to blend the last of the pigment into his hair. It was almost fine, actually. Only itched a little.

Then Nureyev’s hand gently brushed the top of his head.

Juno barely dared to breathe.

They were so, so close. He’d only need to move the slightest bit for Nureyev’s hand to entangle itself in his hair. That option seemed far too tempting for Juno’s own good, but dammit, he didn’t care. He just… he just *wanted.*

...and it was over *way* too quickly.

“And there’s that! Wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” Nureyev set the tin aside before pulling out another, this one slightly larger. He dipped his finger into it and brought it up to Juno’s eyebrow.

“Why the color difference? You can’t have two different kinds of powder… thing…”

“It took me *months* to find and steal the tincture I utilized on your brilliant coif, so you’ll forgive me if I’m a little short with you.”

“What?” He had to fight not to blink. “Seriously, Nureyev, there’s no *way* you needed to—”

“And I *actually* wanted your lashes and brows to be a different color in

the first place!”

“...oh.”

That job got done more quickly than the first. Next to be removed from its case was a small bottle of tincture. Nureyev took the cap off before putting a drop on his finger, and began moving towards Juno.

Juno leaned backwards. “No, no, no way.”

Nureyev tilted his head with a confused look. “Why so hesitant, detective? I’d say this has gone rather well so far.”

“In case you didn’t know, I don’t have another eye to spare after this one. Gotta be more cautious.”

“Ah, of course.” He nodded in understanding. “Well. I can promise that this won’t blind you, Juno, only modify the color of your iris. It’s the safest way to alter eye color.”

Juno mumbled, “That’s what the Kanagawas said, and *now* look at me.”

He raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh, so it was them?”

“Nah. They didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Huh.” He wiped his finger on a cloth before packing away the bottle. With a sly grin and a wink, he reached into his kit to grab—

“Hold on. Is that *eyeliner?”*

Nureyev shrugged with his free shoulder, never once losing his concentration. “It *is* a party, Juno.”

“Huh.” Heating up behind the ears, Juno scowled. “I can do it myself, you know.”

“I suppose, but isn’t this more fun?”

“It’s more of *something,”* Juno grumbled, rolling his eye, but acquiescing nevertheless. “I suppose you’ll want me to close my eye and count to ten?”

Nureyev scoffed. “Oh, *please*. True art necessitates thirty at the very *least.* Any less and my hand starts shaking like mad. We don’t want to end up with a crooked line, don’t we?”

“Better than you poking my eye out and leaving me completely blind,” Juno replied, but shut it nevertheless. A few shaky breaths passed before he felt anything. Not startling at the sensation of the tip of the pencil gently tracing his closed eye was the most difficult part by far. The way Nureyev moved it almost tickled. Still, Juno somehow managed to stay still.

“There we have it!” The pencil left his face for the table before Nureyev clapped his hands. Juno let his eye blink open to see Nureyev looking at him... oddly, to say the least. “My, my, don’t you look beautiful?”

Juno sighed, despite… however else he wanted to react. “Yeah, you would say that.”

The careful expression on Nuryeev’s face betrayed nothing. His voice was carelessly light, but resignedly so. “Well, I *am* an artist.” He leaned back in order to better read Juno’s lips before continuing, “if you don’t mind me asking, Juno—”

“Too bad, ‘cause I do.”

“—how exactly *did* you lose your eye?”

Juno flinched, almost imperceptibly, before looking away from Nureyev. His arms folded tightly. *Of course. You just* had *to ask*. “A game of strip poker got extreme.”

“*Juno.*” Nureyev made a clicking sound with his tongue. When Juno’s scowl didn’t let up, he touched two fingers to Juno’s cheek and turned his head back to face Nureyev’s. He almost seemed concerned. *Laughable* . “Now, *really.* ”

“Well, it’s as good an answer as you’re gonna get, buddy. A little curiosity won’t kill you.”

“Perhaps,” he mused, leaning back in to start on a light layer of blush. “Although if it does, you’ll certainly feel a fool.”

“Not any different from my usual opinions of myself.” Nureyev raised his eyebrows, but didn’t comment. He reached back to grab a stolen tube of lipstick, and Juno’s brain finally caught up with the rest of him. “Hey, wait a minute, why’re you dolling me up, anyways? I can do this on my one, you know. I *do* have taste.”

Nureyev scoffed. “This is a *party,* Juno, and you *are* my date. I have *standards.”*

“Yeah, alright. At least show me the shade.”

“Not until it’s done.” He grinned. “You wouldn’t ask an artist to reveal their work of art before it's completed, would you?”

“Depends on the artist. I hear there are some who never finished theirs.”

“Well, you aren’t planning on leaving me here, are you?”

“Not sure. Depends how smudged my eyeliner is.”

“Oh, Juno. I would *never.”*

Chapter End Notes

scene art by link legend-ofzegend here

# peter

Juno looked... impeccable.

It really was a pity he'd have to leave Juno behind when the job was over and done with.

Peter, of course, knew nothing could ever last. That was the key to disappearing. *Rule number one,* as Mag would say. Still… something about seeing Juno there in front of him, hair dyed a shade of bright teal and sprinkled as though with silver, lashes and eyelid glittering, lips full and obnoxiously neon...

...he wanted.

Juno admired his reflection in the hand mirror. He whistled. "Damn, Nureyev, you were right. You should do me up like this more often."

"I do hope that's a possibility, Juno." *I truly do.* He mentally shook himself. *Don't. Just file it away, Peter. You know you can't.* He had never meant to stay on Mars forever, after all. "You should go get into character. It won't be long now before we arrive."

"...what does that mean?"

*Oh, for the love of the Saints!* "Have you… Juno, have you never… had an alias before?"

Juno shrugged. "I mean, not really? It's just for getting through the doors, right?"

"No, it's *not* exactly '*just for getting through the doors!*'" An irritated edge had slipped into his voice. Peter caught himself, cleared his throat. *See,* this *is why you can't get attached. Lesson one of thieving. Nothing or no one you could lose.* "The point is not to draw attention to yourself. To be another face in a crowd, to be less even than that. To be able to answer questions, or deflect if you can't. To be the *least memorable* person even when they're looking right at you."

And with that, without looking back at Juno, he slipped out the door.

The halls of the Carte Blanche were old but lived-in. There was tacky wallpaper in one hallway, outrageously expensive in another, and something between that looked garish and opulent but left glitter on Peter's nice outfit as he passed. He had still knives to conceal yet.

Before he could retire to his room to do so, he heard the clipped noise of someone walking expertly in heels from behind him. A knife slipped into his fingers. Peter braced himself for action.

"Ah, Ransom!" Buddy said cheerfully, a spark in her eye Peter didn't trust. "Just the man I was looking for. You make it quite difficult sometimes to care about you, you know. You know, with your whole *stealthy* deal and all that."

Peter didn't see how those were connected. He also didn't see how she should be able to "care about him." *We're only working together.* "I was just planning on going over the layout one last time."

"An excellent idea, darling. But before you do that, you wouldn't mind a quick chat with your employer, would you?" Her tone, though pleasant, left no room for refusal.

"I suppose since you'll be the one paying me," he sighed.

"Ah, yes, those *debts* of yours. I'd almost forgotten." There was no way she could have known about his debts. *What the…* "If you're just here for the money, you'll find what I have to say next just as irksome as I find your attitude."

"How do you…"

"It was simple, really. It truly doesn't take a genius to use logic. Or brains, for that matter. You should try it out sometime. Good for you." Buddy continued on as if she hadn't, as Ma—no, surely one of his many marks had been the one to use the phrase—she'd just 'vibe checked' him. "Be careful, darling. More thieves call themselves the best without so much as ever picking a lock. You don't have to *be* the best; that would be rather dull, wouldn't you agree?"

It sounded almost familiar. Almost like—no, like nothing. Peter pushed it back, slamming the imaginary file shut once more.

He nodded, dazed. *What is happening?*

Whether his answer satisfied her or not, Peter couldn't tell. "I suppose that'll have to do, for now. Run along, then. You wouldn't want to miss your ride."

Confused and only too happy to escape this awful conversation, Peter disappeared.

# juno

For being so legendarily difficult to steal from, entering Zolotovna's party was surprisingly simple.

Their group had split into pairs in order to make entry easier. They wouldn't be allowed comms inside—made it all the more exclusive, apparently. It meant they had to be all the more careful. Buddy entered first with Vespa, assigning Rita to enter "alone" with the big guy as her bodyguard. They'd enter later. Juno would have been worried about her, but Rita could handle herself. The only thing making him hesitant now was the possibility of a bored Rita, but she had *plenty* of hacking duties to occupy herself with. This left Juno with, of course, Nureyev.

Juno wasn't exactly thrilled about that.

Despite his hesitation—for more than just personal reasons, the man had *so many knives* —Nureyev seemed to know exactly what he was doing; he'd handed over their false invitations without so much as a word, and they were past the first checkpoint. Juno made a quick note to thank Rita for their invites. She truly knew how to work wonders.

It was as easy as if they truly belonged there.

Nobody seemed to connect the car's nameplate to the legendary vehicle, and if they did, nobody commented on it. The first guard seemed more bored than anything when Nureyev pulled the car up to their checkpoint. "Your credentials?"

Nureyev handed them over smoothly. Juno tried (and nearly failed) to keep himself from telling the guard there was a fake snowflake stuck in their mustache.

"Right. Do you have your account?"

"Yes, of course," Nureyev replied in an… *odd* sort of voice.

"Alright," said the guard before gesturing for them to move along.

"How credible exactly *are* these identities?" Juno wondered aloud as they drove away, waiting for the process to repeat itself.

"I have powerful friends," Nureyev replied smoothly, "and a gentleman never enters a ballroom without absolute certainty

everyone is properly intimidated." A bit softer, he added, "Perhaps don't speak about our *side business* so loud, Juno."

"Yeah, sure." Juno said, idly playing with his dangly earring to try and handle the bizarre energy of the room.

After breezing by the second—and final—checkpoint, Nureyev swept Juno into the party, two elegant people in an elegant ballroom.

Although *ballroom* wasn't the correct word.

It was a large courtyard, where people in the fanciest of outfits slipped on drinks that bubbled and fizzed with the assurance of alcohol. The dresses were exquisite, the suits divine, and all manner of dress in between caught the eye. It was all rather overwhelming. Not even the banquet table was spared; it groaned under the weight of smoked fish, enormous crab cakes and plenty of other delicious-looking appetizers.

Juno had gripped Nureyev's elbow at the sight of a couple doing the same, attempting to blend in slightly more, and Nureyev hadn't said a word about it. That in itself was *so much worse* than any harsh rejection, but like *hell* was Juno was going to mention it. If he was avoiding Nureyev's gaze, it was to keep from breaking.

"Here's the plan," murmured Nureyev into his ear. "I will find out where they're keeping M'tendere. You cover for me."

"This wasn't the—"

"Ta-ta!" And the man slipped away into the crowd.

*Dammit.*

Nobody seemed to be paying him any mind, so Juno decided to walk over and help himself to all the crab cakes he desired. He deserved them after what Nureyev pulled.

He had only just popped his fourth crab cake into his mouth when he saw an extremely familiar, but dubiously homicidal, figure. She wasn't wearing anything remotely fancy-party-like, but she still looked stunning as ever with her knife-sharp smirk and definitely-alcoholic drink in hand.

Maybe she hadn't noticed Juno yet.

The woman drained her drink and wandered towards the table of

canapés, which also happened to be where he was standing. *Dammit.* She leaned against the table and let out a loud, dramatic sigh. "*Damn,* this party is *boring.* Not one person has committed any sort of galactic felony. I feel just *so* alone." She drained her drink, then crunched into the lime-flavored candy the glass had been made of. All the glasses were candy. All of them tasted of lime. It appeared to be sticking to her fingers. "Nothing *fun,* you know?"

Juno, whose mouth was crammed full of appetizers, made a muffled "mph" noise in response. Didn't want to give himself a reason to reply. In fact, better to have every excuse *not* to.

You could never go too far when avoiding Cassandra Kanagawa.

Not just because she wasn't ordinarily chatty. And he didn't dislike her; he and Rita—but mostly Rita, obviously—had broken her out of Hoosegow months ago. But she threw around trouble like it were the ball in a game of Throw-The-Ball-And-Catch-It-Before-It-Hits-Your-Face-Before-Throwing-It-Again.

And just because it hardly ever hit her face didn't mean people didn't pay for it.

Cassandra set her glass down, giving herself an eyeful of private eye and occasional criminal. *Please, Nureyev, please have done a good job.* She whistled low. "Well dang, *somebody* double checked the dress code."

"Hey, thanks, took me two hours to figure out how the zipper worked. Glad it'd been worth it."

"Wait. Hold on." She squinted at him for a few nerve wracking moments before cracking up. "Is that you, Juno? Toying with me, are you?"

*Shit.* Juno Steel swallowed. "Who's that? Never heard of him." Cassandra sobered and quirked an eyebrow. *Make that a double ripe shit from a Quadruple Cerberus.* "...if I said no, would you believe me?"

She snorted. "Oh to all the stars, Steel, am I glad to see you."

"Would you stuff it, Cass?" Juno's eye darted from face to unfamiliar face. His stomach clenched. "I'm undercover."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sure *you* think so."

“I’m *serious.*”

“Yeah, seriously *awful* at it.” She picked up another drink from a passing waiter. “Now. Spill. What kind of undercover gig has you stuffing appetizers in your cheeks, huh?”

“Wow.” His mind raced. “Uh, you know, for someone who was in Hoosegow not a few months ago, you sure are a public figure, huh?”

An eyebrow raised. “Touché. And just so you’re aware, my girlfriend invited me. Said she’d take care of it.”

“Glad to hear it. Besides, it was standard procedure. Signed a contract and all. You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

Cassandra raised her hands in faux surrender. “Wow, Steel. Touchy.”

“You just said that.”

“Shut up, I’m trying to talk to you.” A beat. Juno slowly ate another crab cake. “Anyways, I *guess* I should thank you. For the ride off Mars. Even if you weren’t exactly the one to do the work—”

“Hey, how would you know that?”

“It had your stench all over it.” Cassandra waved a hand in front of her nose teasingly.

“I’m hurt.”

“Whatever, Steel.” She punched his arm. *That’ll leave a bruise.* “Either way, I owe you one.”

“Oh, Ghezen, please don’t. The last time I had a Kanagawa in my debt, your dad tried to get me to let Cecil use me in one of his experiments. And *he* was the one who owed *me.* I’ll pass.”

“It was harmless!”

“He wanted to replace his arm with mine!”

“Take out the ‘h’, then.” She rolled her eyes. “Come *on,* Juno. Really. When did you lose your sense of *fun?”*

“Gave it away along with my self esteem and will to get out of bed in the morning.”

“You know, I always forget how gloomy you get. You need a drink or seventeen.”

“Uh, can’t.” Buddy had forbidden them all from anything that might mess with their awareness level, and that included alcohol.

She raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “Oh, come *on,* Steel. That’s the worst excuse for an excuse I’ve ever heard.”

“Would you believe me if I said I just didn’t want one?”

“Really? You?” Cass scoffed. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“Okay, *now* I’m offended.” Juno crossed his arms and stuck out his tongue. “You really think—”

…and *that’s* when Buddy showed up.

“Ah, Mrs. Rose, *there* you are.” By all the evidence, she sounded pissed. “Might I ask just what your plan was when you stormed over here like a newly-robbed casino manager or are you too busy talking to someone who *certainly* wasn’t on the guest list last time I checked?”

*Shit.* Already anticipating the glare he’d be getting, Juno turned to face her. *Yep, just as bad as I thought.* “…would you believe me if I said I didn’t actually want to talk to her?”

“Wait,” said Cassandra slowly, “who’s this? Is—Juno, did you get *hitched?”* She started laughing hysterically. “Oh, *man,* this is *great!* Best day of my life right here, let me tell y—” Before Cass could finish, a laser hit her in the side.

She collapsed sideways into Juno, who hadn’t expected her to fall that way. He stumbled, but managed to stay upright.

…alright, so it was Juno who’d stunned her. *Oh, she is going to* kill *me for that when she wakes up*. “Sorry about that, but you know what? Not really *that* sorry.” *At least it was cool.*

“She knows you?”

He rolled his eyes. “ *Alright*, Buddy, I *didn’t know* Cass would be here, but I promise there’s *no* way any of the other Kanagawas is here. We’re all good.” But if he had to encounter one of the Kanagawas here —or any of the people he knew for that matter—at least it was Cass. She was the one of the least likely to expose him for personal gain. It

was still more than a fifty percent chance, but hey, any win was definitely good. “She’s on the run. Hasn’t been in contact with her family in a while. Likes it that way.”

Buddy still looked annoyed, but she sighed. “Well. I suppose there’s nothing to do about that now, is there?”

“Not really.”

She rubbed her temples. “Alright then. You go find Ransom, wherever he’s run off to. I’ll bring this Cassandra to one of the private rooms. They’ll assume she’s had some of those spectacularly drugged canapés everyone’s been urging me to try. We *will* talk about this later.”

Juno nodded reluctantly and went to find Nureyev.

# peter

*Ghezen, I missed this.*

Peter hadn't been part of a proper crowd in *weeks.* It was downright *freeing,* all those people with all their *things,* just *begging* to be gently lifted from their homes. A necklace, a pair of earrings, a particularly expensive lollipop sticking out of a purse; whether they'd be missed or not didn't matter. What mattered was the light brush of skin against skin, the *so sorry* s and the *pardon me, Madame*-s, and the circling apologetic hand motions concealing jewels in his closed fist.

He hadn't felt so free in *months.*

Nobody notices a stranger in a crowd. Invisibility is hardly a challenge when one is immersed in a sea of people.

Idly, he wondered how Juno was faring.

Peter decided he'd done enough to assuage his debt for the current moment. He could return to the job and to Juno with heavy pockets and a lightening of the weight at his shoulder. It didn't take long to spot Juno, talking to… someone? He seemed annoyed. *What could he* possibly *be doing?*

He took a step towards Juno.

And then somebody stepped in front of him and began talking *extremely* loudly in his face.

"*Ooooooooooohhh,* well now ex- *cuse me* sir, but may I just say, I saw your dress from over there in the corner—" She waved vaguely behind herself. "—and just *had* to march on over here and tell you just how absolutely *gorgeous* it is! Honestly honey, I ain't seen anything that glamorous since I got all gussied up for this lil' shindig!"

…what?

Peter mentally shook himself. The woman who'd interrupted his work was, of course, dressed extravagantly. In particular, her earrings seemed particularly valuable. She boasted hair as incredible as her presence was startling. He'd gone over the guest list and scanned the faces of the guests when he couldn't sleep one evening. And this woman? He couldn't connect her to any of them.

But more than that, the fact she'd approached him… well.

Peter had thought he was being subtle.

She cleared her throat, causing Peter to snap back to the moment. "Sir, are you feeling alright? I can fetch you a drink if you'd like." *That can't happen.* Just then, he recognized her. It had taken a bit to connect the woman standing before him to the slightly-outdated photo he'd examined earlier, but now he knew who she was.

His demeanor shifted, his voice altered, and he looked Nova Zolotovna in the eye not as the thief who'd stolen from her guests but as a humble yet excitable man, born in the high class, who saw this ball as a future memory he would treasure almost more than that of his wedding day.

"Ah, yes! Thank you," Duke Rose replied jovially. "Really, I have to say, Ms. Zolotovna, you look absolutely stunning! Your gown!"

"Oh, so you're handsome *and* complimentary?" Nova placed a hand on her chest and swooned. "Let me *tell* you, if I weren't already snatched up I'd be all over you like a Saturnian lamprey on metal, and even *then* I'm still tempted!" She made a very disturbing noise with her mouth.

Before he could make an excuse to escape, he felt a hand grab onto his arm. Peter looked over to see Juno, looking frazzled and displeased. "Oh! Dahlia dearest, there you are!"

The scowl marring Juno's face didn't recede. "Alright, now *listen,* just what the hell do you t—oh!" His voice jumped an octave, eyes widening as his gaze met Zolotovna's. "Er, I mean I've been looking all over for you. Uh, honey."

Fortunately, Zolotovna seemed delighted at this new development. She lit up at the sight of him, frankly. "Oh, who is *this?"*

"Uh, Dahlia Rose. I'm his… spouse." Well, at least he didn't say it as if it were a job title.

"Oh, so you're *married,* huh?" Her eyebrows went up. "Ah, well, I was getting that kind of energy from him. Happens to the best of us, I suppose." She leaned in conspiratorially. Rose played along; Juno did not. "You know, *I'll* be doin' the same any ol' day now, you know?"

"Yeah, uh, maybe we'll get an invite." Juno grabbed ahold of Rose's

arm and tugged subtly. “It’s been nice meeting you, Ms. Zolotovna, but we really—”

“Hold up there now, what’s the holdup sugar?” Zolotovna scrutinized Juno with a raised eyebrow. “Nowhere to be. Why, there’s no rush at all!”

“Maybe not for you, which is great! But, *I* just saw an old friend over there who’s leaving soon, and we *really* don't want to miss talking to her. She’ll have our heads if we don’t.”

“Well then I’ll just have to have hers. Come. *Talk* to me.” She made an overly dramatic gesture, complete with tossing a handful of pearls in the air. Juno seemed uncomfortable. Peter really wanted to take the pearls, so he did.

From the other side of the ballroom, away from the crowd, an unfamiliar yet important-sounding voice called, “Ms. Zolotovna?”

She sighed. “Ah, well, I suppose the party had to end sooner or later. Well, anyways. *Do* look for me when I return. Business calls.”

With that, Zolotovna made her way through the crowd towards the hallway. Juno didn’t turn to watch her go before whirling on Peter. “Alright then. *You*.”

Duke Rose replied, “Yes, darling?”

“What the hell was that earlier?!” Juno hissed. “Did you—did you not pay attention during even *one* of the, oh, *five hundred* meetings? You can’t just run off like that?”

“Perhaps not, but at least *I* was scouting the room. Who was that *you* were talking to again, mm?” Juno opened his mouth to gape or to deliver a scathing retort, but just then, the music shifted to one made perfectly for dancing. Peter raised an eyebrow. “It would be best not to argue in the open like this.”

“What do you—oh. *No.”*

He gestured to the dance floor, tastefully ignoring Juno’s groans. “Well. Shall we?”

Juno grimaced, but nodded all the same. “If you insist.”

Duke Rose didn’t dance like someone who had done so before.

However, in the rare occasions in which he allowed himself to be some approximation of Peter Nureyev, his steps were sure yet light. Ballet not only aided his flexibility but lightened his footsteps, giving him more control over his actions.

Dancing with Juno, whose direct and blunt manner transcended above all else at first notice, he'd expected to be a chore. Surely, his feet would stumble; his boots were fashionable, wedged, and perfect for toe stomping. It didn't seem an activity he would enjoy.

His expectations were shattered the instant Juno stepped on the dance floor.

The music held a fast, chaotic rhythm to it, and despite clearly not being of Martian origin, Juno took to it easily. He let himself be led, but his movement sang with the energy of one who knows what they're doing. The quickness of their steps would have tripped Duke Rose in seconds; he found himself needing to adjust. Adapt.

He didn't have a choice but to dance like Peter Nureyev when on the floor with Juno.

And in all honesty, Juno was so beautiful he'd almost forgotten he had been cross with him in the first place.

*A mistake I can't afford to make again.*

"Er, Rose? Dammit, are you even *listening* to me?" The force of Juno's glare shocked Peter out of his trance.

"Perfectly," Peter lied. "I completely understand."

"So you'll return whatever you took from Zolotovna when you were talking with her?"

He blanched. "I'm sorry, I'll do what now?"

Juno spoke dryly. "Your hand slipped into her purse when you were talking to her. I saw.."

"Honestly, Juno, I have no earthly idea what you could possibly—"

"Her earrings were missing too."

"Ah. I'm afraid that would have been me." He arched an eyebrow, thankfully managing to coolly spin Juno while his mind searched for an out. "So, who was that you were talking to earlier? Some Dark

Matters agent? An old flame who left Mars?"

"I can't believe you. What did you take fro…" Juno slowed to a stop, staring intensely at something just behind Peter. His eye sat wide with shock. "Alright, we gotta go. Come on."

"What? Juno, please—"

"Dammit, Nureyev, I'll explain on the way!" He grabbed a hold of Peter's arm and marched forcefully on.

# juno

“I can’t believe Sasha’s here, why on Mars’s microwaved surface is *Sasha Wire* here?!” Juno’s thoughts spun, his head aching with the improbability of it all. In his hurry to exit he had pulled Nureyev to the balcony. “She should be with Dark Matters, shouldn’t—oh.”

“…oh?” Nureyev clearly hadn’t heard a word of what he’d said.

“*Dammit.”* He didn’t have time for this. “Look, Sasha’s an old friend of mine. Real into her work. If *she’s* here, it has to be because of Dark Matters. She took to the sunglasses and dark coat like a duck to radioactive sludge. Haven’t seen her in years.”

“A what?”

“There!” The big guy was standing by the kitchen door, looking almost troubled. Juno pulled Nureyev in his direction. “Hey, er, big guy! We have a problem.”

“I see. Regretfully, so do we,” Jet said gravely. He didn’t let Juno ask whether he meant the royal we or not before continuing. “Rita had already hacked into the system, but one thing is not currently in there.”

“What?”

“The location of our target.”

Juno threw his hands in the air. “Oh, great! Just what we needed. More problems.”

“According to Rita, the data had been scrubbed somewhere around four hours and twenty minutes before the party started. They did not appear to have a reason for this. The record of M’tendere’s cell number is also not in the paper records.”

“Who keeps *paper records* anymore?”

“It is unhackable.”

Juno let out a long, long sigh. “Alright then. Where is it.”

“I do not know. It is possible that it is in her room, though I doubt it. She has an office, but I have other business to attend to.” Jet shifted

his gaze from Juno to Nureyev. “You will go into her office and search for it. It is the room on the—”

“No need. I memorized the layout days ago.”

“Wait, seriously?” More than a little taken aback, Juno glanced at Nureyev. “Should I have done that?”

“Come along, now, Dahlia. I simply *must* show you our host’s extensive collection of Saturnian glassware.” Nureyev took his arm and steered him towards the hallway.

Anyone who owns only one hallway in their entire mansion is a fool. And though that Zolotovna may be, she is also extremely rich. In total, her mansion has three hundred and twenty seven hallways. It, of course, came with that amount of hallways. In order to make use of all of them, she had separate wings for just about everything imaginable.

Including her office.

It was empty, thankfully. Locked, but a wave of the comms Rita gave him (by Nureyev, but only after Juno himself failed to do so an embarrassing amount of times) took care of that. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, but they didn’t turn it on. Too much attention. The clutter inside sat plentiful and expensive, thrown about in a way that made it evident Zolotovna didn’t care much for paperwork. There were clear signs of someone having sat on the desk earlier; the chair had been pushed to the side as well.

Maybe Juno should have researched Zolotovna’s romantic life.

Well. Too late now.

Nureyev surveyed the room with a gaze that held more than simply boredom. He appeared to be thinking through something, but whether it had anything to do with Zolotovna was anyone’s guess.

Juno didn’t like guessing. He preferred to do what any half-decent private-eye would: detective the hell out of this place.

He turned to look through the drawers. “Zolotovna, Zolotovna, Zolotovna…” Juno looked up at Nureyev. “Hey, pick a drawer.”

The man blinked at him. “...top middle.”

“Huh. Bold choice, but alright.” Juno pulled it open. “Damn, no dice.

Just a bunch of jewelry."

"Maybe for you, detective." Nureyev's glasses shone in the light of the gems. Juno glared at him briefly before returning to his task.

"Well, Rita told me earlier her bet's on bottom right, but Zolotovna is left-handed, paranoid as hell, and not the smartest. Bottom left." But not only had they both been wrong, none of the drawers held the information they wanted. He scanned the papers on the desk—nothing. "...do you think she'd keep it in one of the filing cabinets?"

"I checked them already; they're actually a series of mini-fridges." Nureyev shuddered. "She truly has horrible taste in gelatin flavors. I believe I *actually* saw cloned dragonfruit, salmon, and rice."

Juno snorted. "Rita would like that."

"But if it isn't in here…"

"Maybe she has another, more-secret office?"

"Oh, I doubt that. Even someone as paranoid as Zolotovna wouldn't stoop *that* far." Nureyev made a clicking noise with his mouth. "Forgive me for asking, Juno, but would you mind telling me again how you lost that eye of yours?"

*Really. No regard for personal space, huh?* Every time Nureyev repeated that question it got worse. He'd rather have the thief stick his hands in his eye, in his hair—hell, even up his damn *nose* would be fine compared to *this* .

"I bet it in a game of Makker's Wheel and lost."

He laughed, self-assured and surprised. Delighted, even. "Oh, I see."

"And why all the interest, huh? Never seen a lady like this before?"

"Pray tell, whatever could you mean?"

"You *know* what. One-eyed and pissed off." His gaze burned with outrage, but before he could open his mouth to *really* knock Nureyev down a peg or ten, heeled footsteps echoed in the hallway.

They both froze. Juno scanned the room for an exit, but the window was only just contained in the oxygen sphere, so they couldn't go out there. There was only the one door, which had remained ajar. He didn't know how to lock it.

He glanced at Nureyev. The thief appeared to be making several difficult decisions in rapid succession.

“Juno, quickly, hop on the desk.” Juno’s brow furrowed, but he did so nonetheless. Nureyev seemed more flustered than he’d ever seen him; maybe Juno should have seen what was coming next. Frankly, though, he didn’t give a damn. “May I?”

Breathless already, Juno nodded, thoughts frantic over the pounding of his heart. “Yeah, uh, go ahead.”

Juno didn’t have the time to hate how his whole being yearned when Peter Nureyev took hold of his face and kissed him.

# peter

*Juno.*

He should have been paying attention to the proximity of the guards, but the only thing Nureyev could hear was his own heartbeat. He lost track of his hands, only aware that they'd last been seen touching Juno, Juno, *Juno.* His lips were chapped, but it didn't matter. So long as the mouth he was kissing was Juno's…

Nureyev didn't even realize his mind had ceased its constant whirr, so caught up was he in the way Juno kissed back.

His abrupt jolt back to reality only came when Juno (reluctantly, he'd like to think) pulled his face away to look at the officers who'd caught them.

*…ah. Well then.*

"Finally!" The security guard glared at them. "This is a highly restricted area. The door was locked!"

"Wasn't when we got here," Juno shrugged.

"Oh, really?" Duke Rose giggled in the way he always did. "Oh, that *would* be my mistake, I'm afraid. We were so busy observing all the lovely hallways our host has that we must have missed our rooms! It's simply a *labyrinth* in here, don't you agree, my quadruple-cerberus-faced darling?"

"It's something alright." Rose stepped back in order to let Juno jump off the desk. But when he did, Juno's hand brushed a pocket in Peter's dress, causing a small paper to fall out. Nureyev's deft fingers scooped it up before the guard could see.

The expression on the security guard's face communicated discomfort aplenty. "Fine, whatever, just get out of here, alright? Do you need an escort to your rooms?"

"No, no, we can manage just fine." While pretending to adjust his gloves, Peter discreetly tucked the paper into a hidden pocket he'd requested. After all, one could hardly be *too* careful. He took Juno's arm.

"Good. Just don't let it happen again."

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll lead this time, don’t worry.” And Juno swept him out of the room and far, far away.

When they’d retreated far enough, Peter retrieved the piece of paper and read it over. When he was done, he read it one more time. “Er, Juno, you wouldn’t mind taking a look at this, would you?”

Looking almost disinterested, Juno took the paper from his hand. “Crowbar prison, cell #2496.” He groaned loudly. “...are you kidding me?!”

“Apparently not.” Peter sighed, but there was relief in it as well. “Oh, do cheer up now, Dahlia! This is a good thing for us! We have it now!”

Juno obviously didn’t agree with him, but for what reason, Peter couldn’t tell. “How did you—”

“You knocked it out of my pocket when we were exiting the office, detective. I’m not one to shun a sign of good fortune. I don’t suppose you’d agree?”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Juno grumbled.

‘I’m afraid I’m not fully aware of what you’re looking for, Juno. I do have a habit of keeping my hands busy. Perhaps it slipped in by accident?”

“But why would someone else have the—” Juno halted dead in his tracks. “You were with Zolotovna earlier. It’s entirely possible you could have—”

“Come on then, Juno! Right this way!”

Juno groaned loudly before following.

It was a good thing, too. Peter almost took a wrong turn on their way back to the ballroom, his thoughts far away from Zolotovna’s opulent manor.

Honestly, where would he be without Juno?

# juno

For all Jet Sikuliaq's impressive stream-related feats and his ability to listen to Rita ramble for hours on anything but his past, he was… not great at acting drunk.

"Hey. Uh. Hey, honey." Juno slumped on the big guy's shoulder. He could feel the subtle tension in Jet's frame. The only way he could be worse at this would be if he walked up to Zolotovna herself and told her they were here to do crimes. "Wh' time's it?"

Solemnly, Jet checked his watch (...why did he even *have* a watch?). "It is twenty minutes to—"

Juno chuckled loudly, slugging Jet on the arm. "Nah, 's time for *you* to loosen *up!"* With the way Jet tensed up at that, Juno was relieved the big man couldn't chastise him for his teasing with people around.

"I will not do that."

Juno missed Nureyev already. Despite all his thievery, at least *he'd* been a halfway-decent actor. The thief had understood why they'd left him behind at the balcony, but as he'd said, that didn't mean he had to like it.

He continued to lug Juno all the way over to where the Ruby Seven was parked. It beeped a hello when Jet opened the doors and allowed him to stumble in.

"Thank goodness that is over. You are not heavy, but you are quite clingy."

"Hey, I was acting!" Juno protested loudly before being shushed. He continued in a mutter, "and maybe I'm not heavy to *you* , but you could lift a full-grown sewer rabbit no sweat."

It was a short drive to Crowbar Prison, located on the planet below Zolotovna's floating mansion. They would never keep M'tendere in a place with no real guns, of course, so knowing their location was vital. It just so happened the name on the lease was 'Zova Nolotovna'. The prison had higher security than Juno had expected, but they couldn't just hack their way everywhere, so they had to plan for every contingency.

That's what Juno's gun was for.

...and he really did *not* feel confident about using it.

Back before he lost his eye, he wouldn't have had any qualms with the plan. Hell, he might have even suggested it. But now? Now he was nothing but a washed-up has-been who thinks he's still got it. Had he tried to use it, best case scenario he'd miss completely and they'd all suffer for it. Worst case was… much worse.

Regardless, they found the floor M'tendere was on and made a hole in the wall big enough to walk through. The noise the concrete made as it crashed to the ground far below was loud, but Juno's heartbeat felt louder, and wasn't that what really counted?

They emerged in the stairwell. There was a large metal door requiring a key swipe to get in, but Rita had taken out the countermeasures days ago. Jet just held his comms up to the pad and they were in. Shortly afterwards, he did the same to M'tendere's cell door.

It wasn't so much a cell as a workshop. There were tools and metal scattered all over, designs for weapons that had been violently scribbled out. Half-completed inventions were strewn about. In the middle of it all M'tendere sat cross-legged on the floor, guitar in hand, scribbling on a notepad with paper old enough to have yellowed noticeably. Their tongue stuck out of their mouth as they wrote.

They didn't seem particularly dangerous, for 'the most dangerous person in the system'.

After about half a minute, noticing the door was open, they finally looked up; not at Juno or Jet, but at the wall in front of them. "So, you're finally going to kill me, huh? You turn on me and repay me like *this?"*

"I am not here to kill you."

M'tendere didn't startle, but it was a close thing. They looked over and examined the big guy with a nonchalant veneer barely cloaking their intrigue. "Alright, then. Jet Sikuliaq, right?"

"That is correct."

They nodded with a quirked brow before glancing at Juno. "And you are…?"

“Juno Steel. Can we go?”

“Of course.” M’tendere slung their instrument over their back and stood up. “But I’m bringing my guitar.”

Juno blinked. “What.”

“This is an impractical course of action. I suggest you leave it be.” Jet folded his arms. “It will not aid our escape.”

“Maybe.” They shrugged. “But it brings me joy. Do you have something that brings you joy, Jet Sikuliaq?”

Jet was silent. That alone was enough to tip Juno off to the fact something was off between the two of them. An alien kind of tension lined Jet’s frame, and it didn’t look good.

The best he could do was to keep them focused on him. “Does drinking alone in my room count? I think it does.” Juno crossed his arms before conceding with a grumble and a glance at his companion. “…fine. I *guess* if that makes it *important* to you. Oh, but since it’s more so than your safety—or our pay, for that matter—you’ll be happy to hear I won’t argue. It’s not like it’s gonna be *really* difficult to conceal or—”

“Do you have anything under that skirt of yours?”

*What the hell kind of question is that? Or rather, I* should *be asking what brand of drugs are in the prison food?* “…I mean, my legs?” There was no way M’tendere was both sober and sane.

“You could conceal the guitar there,” they suggested with *way* too much nonchalance.

Jet frowned, thinking. “That could work.”

Juno turned to him. “Hey, big guy? Here’s a tip. Shut up.”

“I see no purpose in doing this.”

“Oh, I’ll show you *purpose*— ”

M’tendere their throat. “Hate to add more to your obviously-full plates —”

“Then don’t.”

“—but I also need my battery. And that bag.”

Juno let himself lean his head back and groan loudly. “How many supplies are you planning on bringing?”

“Just those.” They paused. “Although, I *do* have some mostly-finished projects that might be helpful. On second thought, hold on a moment.”

*Why the hell did I agree to this again?*

# peter

Well.

This was a development.

Peter would be lying if he said he didn't want to resume his blissful thievery among the guests, but then again, he lied about everything. Perhaps it'd be best to keep a low profile for—

*"MISTAH RANSOM!"*

The shrill shriek cut though the air like a plasma knife through bone. The source appeared to be a very small woman rushing towards him at an alarming rate, hands waving frantically through the air.

"...Rita?" He couldn't help but sound as bemused and befuddled as he felt. That simply wouldn't do. He had a role to play here. "What—this wasn't part of the plan!"

Rita grabbed hold of his elbow and promptly began to, as they say, 'chat up an artificial storm'. "Yeah, well, Miz Vespa told me she had Miz Kanagawa under control, and Mistah Jet has my second-best spare comms, just in case, 'cause this ain't my first rodeo, even if it *is* my first heist, ain't that just the niftiest thing? And it's all going so—"

" *Miss Rita!"* Nureyev hurried to press a finger to her lips. "You wouldn't want to jinx us or alert the authorities, would you?"

"Well, if you say so, but ain't that only in the streams?"

"It certainly never hurts!"

"Alrightie then." She quieted her tone to a whisper *even louder* than her speaking voice. Her head bobbed as she bounced on her toes. "Ooh! Are we gonna go do crimes now?"

"That *includes* stating our intentions within view of security cameras." Nureyev mentally pulled up the map of Zolotovna's he'd examined previously. They weren't, of course, directly on any radars, but it was best to be careful nonetheless. *Rule one of thieving,* he thought out of habit.

"Uhh, Mistah—"

“Rose will do.”

“Mistah Rose, you know I took care of all the security cameras, right? ‘Cause I didn't want Mistah Steel tripping over one a’ them again, the last time *that* happened he was limpin’ for *weeks* and so grumpy all the time! I mean I *suppose* I get it, ‘cause it was super obvious and he really shouldn’t’a done that, he should really be more careful *w—hey now you wait just a second mistah my legs ain’t as long as yours!”*

Peter paused in order to let Rita catch up to him. The hallway was identical to every other hallway he’d seen that day, with slightly less pretentious paintings. Nothing appealed to his eye.

“Well that's a weird sign. You’d think she wouldn’t need to ” Rita said. Peter opened his mouth to disagree, but then the sign on the door caught his eye. *BORING TAX FILES* , it read .

*This isn’t where she keeps her finances.* As a matter of fact, Zolotovna wouldn’t even do her own taxes; if she paid them at all, she’d likely pay someone to fill them out for her.

At first, nothing seemed off; the door he stood by looked just like every other door he’d seen here. But after a moment he realized there was a keypad for a passcode; something none of the other doors had possessed. Upon further reflection, he realized the room wasn’t on the blueprint Rita had downloaded.

At the very least it merited investigation.

The door was, of course, locked. Rita held her comms up to it, typed too fast for Peter to comprehend, and hummed triumphantly. It wasn’t locked anymore.

Peter pressed a button and the door whooshed open.

“Whoa…” breathed Rita. Whoa indeed.

Of course the first thing Peter saw was a tank. A massive, very armed tank. The shields looked like they could take an insane amount of brute force and just… keep on moving. He hadn’t seen anything remotely like that before.

And there were more vehicles like it throughout the entire garage. Because that’s what this room was, really; a hidden garage.

“This is just like in *Spy Cars 7: No People Just Stealth Cars* !” Rita

declared. Peter had never seen that stream, but he wasn't about to doubt her. He took a few steps forward to see what else might be in there.

...or at least that's what he *meant* to do.

Peter only made it one step before two stun blasts hit his chest in quick succession.

Immediately he collapsed to the floor.

From somewhere in front of him came a clipped, matter-of-fact voice. "That's better. Now. Who are you and where is Juno Steel?"

The penultimate coherent thought that floated through his head was centered on the alarm, or lack thereof. It was strange; there hadn't been any signs they'd been noticed, and surely at least one of them would have noticed if there had.

However, Nureyev's final thoughts had already been reserved for Juno.

End Notes

thank you so so much for reading!! you can find me at nottodaylogic on tumblr :)

please consider leaving comments and/or kudos because this is my baby child and there Will be more, also comments are just Pure Writing Fuel so

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!